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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how a series of action research projects, supported and guided through a university-public elementary school partnership program, began. It also presents the content and impact of the action research projects from the voices of a university professor, classroom teacher, and principal. The partnership promoted study groups which involved preservice and inservice teachers and were led by university education faculty. The groups explored such topics as multiple intelligences, block scheduling, emotional intelligence, inclusion, literature-based reading programs, and cultural awareness of diverse students. The preservice and inservice teachers worked on their action research projects by focusing on five areas: problem formation, data collection, data analysis, reporting the results, and action planning. Participants found the projects exciting and rewarding. The action research helped create systematic change in teachers' attitudes about themselves, their teaching, and their teaching abilities. It also helped improve student learning as teachers researched new areas, improved teacher effectiveness as teachers experimented and reflected on educational innovations, contributed to teacher professional development as they shared what they learned with colleagues, and helped teachers overcome isolation. (SM)

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SUPPORTING SYSTEMATIC CHANGE THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

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The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the paper will focus on how a series of action research projects, supported and guided through a university/public school partnership program, began, and secondly, the paper will present the content and impact of the action research projects from the voices of a university professor, classroom teacher, and principal.

What Is Action Research?

Action research, also known as teacher research, has the potential for systematic change in the ways in which teachers teach as well as how they think about themselves as professionals. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) define teacher research as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p. 3). This definition, which they credit to the work of Stenhouse provides a framework for evaluating the research and writing carried out by teachers. In explicating this definition, they argue:

> By systematic we refer primarily to ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences inside and outside of classrooms, and making some kind of written record. By intentional we signal that teacher research is an activity that is planned rather than spontaneous. And by inquiry we suggest that teacher research stems from or generates questions and reflects teachers' desires to make sense of their experiences---to adopt a learning stance or openness toward classroom life. (P. 3)

Based on this explanation, teacher research is more than thinking about and reflecting on normal everyday, classroom experiences. It is a focus on inquiry into problems or practice and the subsequent rethinking of classroom practice. The notion of action in the research process provides a descriptive label often associated with teacher-research, that is, action research. Corey (1953)

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2
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defined action research as "research undertaken by practitioners in order that they may improve their practices...to solve their practical problems by using the methods of science" (p. 141)

Getting Started

For the last six years, Indiana University South Bend (IUSB) and the South Bend Community School Corporation (SBCSC) has had a Partnership Program (see Holm & Divins, 1996 for a description of this program). As a result of this Partnership, preservice teachers have worked with students and taught lessons in the classrooms of Partnership schools and inservice teachers from these same schools have engaged in study groups led by IUSB education faculty.

Throughout the last six years, these study groups have explored such topics as: multiple intelligence, block scheduling, emotional intelligence, inclusion, developing a literature-based reading program, and understanding the cultural needs of minority students. As part of these study groups, the teachers and university faculty members read various books and articles on the selected topic of study. To support the purchase of materials, during the last three years, money has been available through an Educate Indiana grant to purchase books, pay teachers a small stipend for participation, and even to provide food for the after school sessions. Within this context of study groups, one group of teachers at Hay Elementary decided that instead of a study group they wanted to engage in action research projects.

Hay Elementary is an K-6 grade school within the South Bend Community School Corporation with thirty-eight teachers and 730 students. The school has 54% on free/reduced lunch. The six female teachers who participated in the action research projects had 3, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 18 years of teaching experience.

University Professor's Voice

I have been leading teacher study groups in the Partnership schools for the last six years. My participation in these various groups has been an important way in which I can stay abreast of the needs and concerns of classroom teachers, which helps me to better prepare the students in reading and languages arts methods courses that I teach at IUSB. My participation in study groups also helps me to feel that I am giving something back to the teachers who so willingly, year after year, mentor IUSB's preservice teachers.

When I first met with the six teachers at Hay, I did not know what they wanted to study. At first, I thought that they would want to engage in a traditional study group. However, after talking with them, I discovered that they wanted to each study, in a more systematic way, a topic of interest in the language arts. During this first meeting we set up the dates for the next few sessions and I asked them to conceptualize their topic as an exploratory question.

During our second meeting, I provided the teachers with an outline to help them conceptualize their action research project. This outline consisted of five areas to consider as they explored their topics. The five areas I presented were:

1) Problem Formation (What is your question?)
2) Data Collection (What will you use to investigate your question?)
3) Data Analysis (How will you organize the information you collected?)
4) Reporting the Results (How will you share the results with others?)
5) Action Planning (Where do you go from here?)

In this second session we discussed each of these areas and then the teachers developed their initial questions. These questions centered around the interests of the teachers and are listed below:

Problem Formation

---(A) What does the current brain research tell us about learning and motivation?
---(B) What are literacy centers? How are literacy centers implemented? Are literacy centers important?
---(C) How can community building improve (affect) language arts?
---(D) How do the majority of students learn to read? Is it through phonics or whole word identification?
---(E) Which curriculum design enhances teaching and learning? What are the important content areas? What design is the most flexible and allows for student learning styles? What keeps students engaged and interested?
---(F) How do I make phonics instruction meaningful to my students?

Data Collection and Analysis

Once the teachers had developed their question, the group and I met five more times over a four month period to discuss their progress in pursuing their questions. These meetings, held after school, provided the teachers a chance to share resources (such as books and articles) and to just talk about what was going well and not so well with their research. This sharing time was a critical element to this project since it allowed the teachers time to share with each other, but, more importantly, to both indirectly and directly ask each other for ideas and assistance in exploring their topics.

In all cases, the teacher decided to use a reflective journal as both the source for recording and analyzing data.

Reporting the Results

The eighth and last session provided the teachers a chance to share with the action research group their final results. During this session, the teachers brought in examples of student work, and in one case, a teacher even took the group to her classroom so she could better explain the results of her study.

Action Planning

In action research, the "Where do we go from here?" question is critical for ongoing reflection. After their final presentations, the teachers shared the new questions that they wanted to explore. These new questions are labeled to correspond with the initial questions listed above. So, for example, the teacher with question (A) above is also question (A) below.

---(A) What can I do to plan more student-generated project-based activities? How will I ever get the time to read all of the info I have decided are "must reads"?
---(B) How do I find time in a busy day to implement these?
---(C) Will beginning at the beginning of school be more effective? Will it equally improve math?
---(D) Is there a compiled list of all schools, who have incorporated a phonics-based program in their curriculum, showed significant improvement in reading and test scores? Is there any one phonics-based program researchers agree upon that ensures success?
---(E) What activities help my students learn best? Will these designs keep in less motivated students on task? What is the ideal way for each student to utilize his/her own learning style, but reach understanding?
---(F) How do I continue making phonics meaningful on a daily basis so that the skills my group of students learned are retained?

Thoughts on Project

I found the teachers to be highly interested in this project. They were eager to share what they were learning with their colleagues and asked me for suggested resources as they explored their topics. One teacher's comment to me was an especially powerfully example of the impact this project had on her. She told me, "I learned a lot about myself as a learner by doing my study. I discovered that people learn in different ways. I now have a better understanding of how my students learn because of my experiences as a learner."

If I were to modify this project for next year, I would do the following:

---Have a text, such as *Action research: An educational leader's guide to school improvement* (Glanz, 1998) as a guide to presenting various ways in which the teachers could collect and analyze the data.

---Have more opportunities to discuss the topics. If the project were to last a full year, the teachers could have more time to meet with the group.

---The teachers need more time to share their projects with the nonparticipating teachers at the school. This is important because it would allow all of the teachers at the school to understand that they too, can explore problems of practice.

Teacher's Voice

Karen Hunter has been a teacher for the last seven years. She is currently teaching fifth grade. The following is her presentation of her project.

Abstract

Mathematics, social studies, science, English, reading, writing, editing, organizing information, following directions, health, sharing, are there enough hours in a day? What is important content? What keeps students interested and engaged as learners? What will they need to succeed in the future? How can I design lessons that will help those "important" pieces of content stick? How do I design curriculum that will meet all learners learning styles?

There are many design theories to help a teacher plan curriculum, but which of those theories help students learn? Which theory is the most flexible when it comes to learning styles? This study investigates three curriculum design practices, the Hunter Model, the *Atlas Communities* (The New American Schools Development Corporation, 1996) Model, and the *Understanding by Design Model* (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Using action research, the models will be used to design curriculum and become implemented in my classroom. The study will attempt to answer the questions outlined in the beginning of the abstract.

Relevance of Study

Indiana, like so many other states has made a push for school reform. With programs like PBA, the ISTEP +Test and the State Proficiency Guides, the legislators hope to make improvements in the education of Indiana youth. This renewed pressure has caused teachers to look at what we are teaching. In my case, it was the way in which I teach Social Studies. My students were not engaged. They didn't like U.S. history. I needed to find a viable vehicle for organizing content, to make it relevant to my students' lives, and to keep my students engaged and interested in learning.

Design and Methodology

The project will combine action research and a review of relevant literature, including, but not limited to, *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) and *Atlas Communities* (The New American Schools Development Corporation, 1996). I will also seek out current research on "Brain-based learning" to support design processes used. I will design units to implement curriculum in the classroom, based on the literature. A journal will be used to make observations and reflections on units. I will also include student artifacts and student reflections as a part of the study. Included in the journal will be a log of student reaction to the project, a checklist on engagement level, as well as benchmarks to determine the depth of student learning.

Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

* When I gave the students rubrics before the task, or we made the rubric together, the scores on the task increased. Students paid more attention to accuracy, legibility, and revised projects.

* I found out that I needed to back up on a few skills. The level I expected was not necessarily what my students were capable of.

* It was easy to use the templates from *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) to

form lessons, but some had to be "fixed" while working with it.

* The template design does not include a section for addressing needs of students with disabilities, but those needs are easily met by adjusting work load, having someone read ro record for the student, or adding work time.

* *Atlas Communities* (The New American Schools Development Corporation, 1996) design was too unfocused--the brainstorming at the beginning was uncontrollable and unmanageable. It also didn't allow for enough up-front planning to be useful for me.

* The idea of focusing the "Big Idea Questions" helps when I am planning the lessons.

* Students spent more time on task during the units. The rubrics gave them a purpose and the outlines of the unit were helpful in telling them what we were going to do.

Since implementing this project, I have decided that I will continue to use the templates from *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). In addition, I will add two components to this unit approach. First, I will add a parent letter to each unit so I can explain to parents the content of the study. Next, I will provide the parents with a resource list of videos, books, or experiences which would add to the student's understanding of the topic.

Thoughts Concerning Action Research

The following are a few of my thoughts concerning the action research project:

* The project provided me an opportunity to talk to other teachers, outside the "teacher lounge", in a more professional atmosphere.

* I saw my colleagues in a different light--instead of just "that teacher down the hall" they became an interested professional with goals and objectives.

* When I was frustrated with my research, others helped shed light or helped brainstorm possible avenues to explore that I wouldn't have thought of on my own.

* The project was not something I had to do, but something I looked forward to. I didn't feel pushed by the group but I didn't want to let them down either. I stayed on task with the research because of my affiliation with the group.

Principal's Voice

As the principal at Hay Elementary, I had the opportunity to both talk with the six teachers who participated in the action research group and observe the implementation of their projects in their classrooms. The following bullets are my thoughts related to the project:

---In talking with the classroom teachers, I found them excited and enthusiastic as they explored their topics. This excitement is important, because teachers are learners too in the school organization.

---This type of project provided teachers an opportunity to apply research and inquiry-based instruction to the process of teaching.. What I noticed in the teachers who participated, was a renewed sense of the importance to continue to grow as professional educators through the process of study and experimentation.

---The teachers were able to explore a topic that was meaningful to them. This is important because the inservice training organized by the school or the Corporation may not always meet the individual teacher's needs. Through this type of action research project, the teachers are able to design their own learning experiences and work toward solving their problems of practice.

---This type of program allows time for teachers to talk with one another. Too often during the course of the school day, teachers do not have adequate time to talk about educational issues with each other. During the course of this project, however, teachers were able to meet and share with each other and better understand and learn from each.

I believe that action research is a powerful growth and change agent. I would like to see

this project expanded next year to include the following:

---Develop the action research group into an all year project so that teachers can research their topics throughout the course of the school year.

---Provide ongoing opportunities for the researchers to share with the whole faculty the projects that they are working on.

---To take the IUSB/SBCSC Partnership to another level by having the teachers involved in the action research group present their projects at the University. This would allow both undergraduate and graduate students an opportunity to learn from professional educators teaching in an urban setting.

Conclusions

Action research has always had the potential for systematic change in teachers altitudes about themselves and their teaching as well as in their teaching abilities. These potentials are what give action research power. Although there are multiple perspectives and benefits to action research, there are four themes which are critical to highlight as concluding thoughts.

1)Action research can improve student learning as teachers read about and try new instructional, curricular, and assessment practices.

2) Teaching effectiveness improves as teachers systematically experiment and reflect on instructional curricular, and assessment innovations.

3) Action research contributes to teachers' development as professionals as they share what they have learned with colleagues and preservice students

4) Action research can assist teachers in overcoming the isolation that is commonly experienced by classroom teachers

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